

Factors Influencing Employee Productivity – A Saudi Manager’s Perspective

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Abstract

This study provides an in-depth exploration of the employee, managerial, and organizational factors that influence employee productivity from a Saudi manager’s perspective. A generic qualitative design with thematic analysis of 17 in-depth interviews with Saudi managers from different industries is employed. The findings demonstrate that the employee factors relate to the employee’s perceived personal gain of being productive and their sense of ethical responsibility to do so. Also, the managerial factors encompass aspects that are in the manager’s control and relate to the manager’s attitude towards and familiarity with their employees, responsible behavior, communication of company goals and strategies, time spent on personal evaluations of employees, and attention for employee recognition. Lastly, the organizational factors make working for a company (un)attractive and refer to tangible benefits, work flexibility, professional development opportunities, and the physical environment. The study offers insights for Saudi managers and companies on how employee productivity can be increased.

Keywords: employee productivity, influencing factors, management, Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

1.1 Problem Statement

Employee productivity, referring to the amount of output created by an employee in a specific timeframe, is paramount for any company’s survival (Nasution, Mahargiono, & Soesatyo, 2016). Essentially, a company can only survive if the combined productivity of its employees exceeds the company’s costs. As such, any business strives for maximum employee productivity. The literature suggests that a productive employee equals a happy and satisfied employee (Bawa, 2017). This, in turn, seems to depend on a variety of factors, ranging from monetary incentives (e.g., Bawa, 2017) to training and development opportunities (e.g., Kum et al., 2014; Mahamid, 2013) and job involvement (Khan, 2011). Qualitative studies that specifically seek to determine the factors that impact employee productivity seem to be scarce, however – especially in a Saudi context (Hamad & Al-Kwafi, 2015). Also, previous studies covering this topic usually focus on only one aspect of employee productivity, and a clear and in-depth overview of the most important factors that impact employee productivity seems to be lacking. In addition, it is noteworthy that those studies covering this specific topic are usually quantitative in nature (e.g., Bajaba et al., 2021a; Bajaba et al., 2021b; Hamad & Al-Kwafi, 2015; Kum et al., 2014; Pencavel, 2016; Tahir et al., 2014) and therefore are based on predetermined hypotheses. These papers fail to provide a full picture of how employee productivity can be improved. The result is that important details and new insights that could only be covered through qualitative research may be missing. Based on the premise that a qualitative exploration of the various factors that impact employee productivity can bring forth a fresh and inclusive perspective on the topic, the aim of this qualitative study is to provide an exploration of the employee, managerial, and organizational factors that influence employee productivity, from a Saudi manager’s perspective. The analysis and discussion of the paper were guided by three research questions:

RQ1: What are the employee-dependent factors that influence employee productivity from a Saudi manager’s perspective?

RQ2: What are the managerial-dependent factors that influence employee productivity from a Saudi manager’s perspective?

RQ3: What are the organizational-dependent factors that influence employee productivity from a Saudi

manager's perspective?

The paper is organized as follows: first, an overview of the literature on this topic is provided. This is followed by a description of the methodology adopted in the study. The findings from the study are then presented in the form of three key themes and a number of subthemes. The ramifications of the results are highlighted in the final considerations.

1.2 Literature Review

A thorough literature review on employee productivity suggests that the factors that impact an employee's productive behavior are universal, with employee motivation (Bawa, 2017), monetary rewards (Bawa, 2017), employee recognition (Banya, 2017; Bawa, 2017), work flexibility (Karim, 2020; Pencavel, 2016), management communication (Iqbal, 2010; Kum et al., 2014; Mahamid, 2013; Mahamid et al., 2013) and labor experience and skills (Darachart, 2019; Kum et al., 2014; Mahamid, 2013; Mahamid et al., 2013; Tahir et al., 2014) being mentioned and studied most commonly. Although these factors seem to be relevant in all contexts and geographical regions, some subtle differences are noticeable in terms of their carried weight. For example, it is noteworthy that company culture is discussed much more in Southeast Asian vs. Middle Eastern/Western recent literature (Adam et al., 2020; Purnomo et al., 2020; Sabuhari et al., 2020). We speculate that this does not necessarily mean that company culture is not an important factor in Middle East; it may just be that the relevance of company culture is overshadowed by other, potentially more relevant factors. One of those factors relates to labor experience and skills. Although lack of experience is considered as a significant inhibitor of employee productivity worldwide (Falola et al., 2014; Kum et al., 2014), it seems to be especially cited in Middle Eastern literature. Taking into account that due to a long history of relying on foreign expertise, high rate of Saudi workers is relatively unskilled (Peck, 2017), it seems that more and effective training sessions for Saudi employees are required. Further, taking into account that studies conducted in other countries have systematically found that offering skill development opportunities are appreciated by employees and leads to higher productivity (Kum et al., 2014; Tahir et al., 2014), the need for offering such opportunities in Saudi companies is suggested. This need for investment in training and skills development (and the current lack thereof) in Saudi Arabia has been further supported by Ramdani et al. (2014), who adds that such training programs need to be well-designed, though, to have the desired effect on employee performance.

One factor that has gained equal attention in Asian/Western/Middle Eastern contexts refers to employee motivation/engagement. Bawa (2017) describes employee motivation as "to be inspired to go beyond the call of duty" (p. 663) and to complete a task or produce a good out of personal desire. Some recent studies on the topic have highlighted that motivated or engaged employees are more creative than non-motivated/non-engaged employees (Ismail et al., 2019), and are less likely to demonstrate absenteeism and/or non-productive behavior. Hence, employee motivation and engagement lead to higher employee productivity (Jamal, 2014; Tuna et al., 2018). According to Bawa (2017), such motivation stems predominantly from the prospect of acquiring financial and non-financial rewards, like bonuses, promotions, and recognition. In the Middle Eastern context, these "reward systems" seem to play a particularly important role with various scholars finding that financial and non-financial reward have a significant impact on an employee's performance (Ramdani et al., 2014; Serhan et al., 2021).

Work flexibility is another factor that seems to impact employee productivity (Darachart, 2019; Karim, 2020; Pencavel, 2016), with fewer working hours leading to improved productivity. This topic has gained much attention; however, to our knowledge none of these studies pertain to the Saudi context. However, there are studies on the topic in Middle Eastern literature; for example, Gholitabar et al. (2020) found that employees who feel unsupported by their management in terms of work-family balancing opportunities are more inclined to develop burnouts and unproductive behaviours. In alignment with the previous, Mahamid (2013), Mahamid et al. (2013), and Iqbal (2010) found that miscommunication and lack of collaboration between managers and employees are amongst the most significant managerial factors that impact employee productivity. Such lack of communication and collaboration can lead to misinterpretation or unclarity of company objectives which then negatively influences employee productivity (Iqbal, 2010; Mahamid, 2013; Mahamid et al., 2013). In addition, Kum et al. (2014) found that lack of personal feedback to employees decreases productivity, as the absence of these personal evaluations makes employees feel undervalued and less accountable. Although all the above demonstrates the (potential) relevance of these factors in a Saudi context, the lack of an inclusive perspective that provides an overview of the employee, managerial, and organizational factors, calls for a qualitative deep-dive into the topic.

2. Research Method

2.1 Research Design

The study employed a generic qualitative design with a thematic analysis approach. Qualitative research aims to understand a phenomenon based on people's perceptions and everyday lives (Silverman, 2021). As this study sought to understand and explore the employee, managerial, and organizational factors that influence employee productivity, from a Saudi manager's perspective, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate.

2.2 Study Participants

The participants of this study were 17 Saudi managers from different sectors. Table 1. visualizes some important participant demographics. Participant numbers will be used throughout the results section to link quotes to participants.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Participant Number	Position	Industry
1	District Manager	Banking
2	Functional Manager	Chemical Manufacturing
3	Personnel Manager	Telecommunications
4	Project Manager	Oil and Gas
5	General manager	Law
6	Group manager	Retail
7	Assistant Director of Planning	FMCG
8	Regional Manager	Electric Energy
9	Operations Manager	Aviation
10	Director of Health and Environment	Manufacturing
11	Area Manager	Banking
12	Branch Manager	Banking
13	General Manager	Medical
14	Airport Ground Operations manager	Aviation
15	Performance Manager	Postal and Parcel
16	Factory Manager	Manufacturing
17	Budget Analysis Manager	Aviation

2.3 Data Collection Measures

Data for this study were collecting using 17 semi-structured individual in-depth interviews. Due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted in a virtual setting via Zoom between March 2021 and July 2021. Semi-structured interviews were evaluated as the most suitable data collection tool for this research study because semi-structured interview protocols contain open-ended questions and follow a general format. However, they leave sufficient space for the participant to add things themselves (Wethington & McDarby, 2015). The general format of the interview protocol, which included a set of prepared questions as well as overall topics for the interview (Kallio et al., 2016), was prepared by the researcher in advance. Follow-up questions and further probing questions were added if needed on a case-by-case basis. Interviews were conducted in Arabic, transcribed, and then translated into English; the initial translation tried to keep the idiomatic nature of the Arabic and was used to code the responses (Santos Jr et al., 2015).

2.4 Data Analyses

The specific analysis technique that was deployed was the six-step thematic analysis approach as defined by (Braun et al., 2019). The six steps are: familiarization with the data, generating coding, constructing themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Practically, the researcher first read and re-read the transcripts to get familiar with the data. Next, codes were assigned to text fragments

that represented a particular idea. This process continued to a point where no new codes or concepts could be identified. Following coding, connections between different codes were identified as categories. Similar categories were then gathered under subthemes and themes. In a fourth step, the researcher re-examined the emergent categories against the data to accurately represent the data. Subthemes and themes were then named, and a report was produced.

3. Results

3.1 Employee Factors

The employee factors are related to the employee's motivation and sense of responsibility. Essentially, our findings suggest that employee productivity largely depends on how intrinsically motivated employees are to contribute to their company. This intrinsic motivation seems to be guided by two principles or factors: self-interest or personal gain and feelings of ethical responsibility. Both factors are elaborated on below.

3.1.1 Personal Gain

In terms of self-interest or personal gain, managers believe that some employees are highly productive because they gain personal satisfaction from knowing that they contribute to their workplace.

"I desire to improve my production even if it is small. For me, productivity is associated with a sense of achievement." [14]

With motivation being considered a great predictor of employee productivity, participants noted that the lack thereof can be problematic, especially when this attitude persists regardless of the manager's efforts to change this behavior. Some possible explanations for persisting unproductive behavior were shared; for example, it was believed that some employees are just naturally disinterested in personal growth. These are usually individuals who lack ambition and do not like change but rather seek to maintain the status quo. As a result, they will not find any reason to increase their productivity and will not change their work ethic.

"Some people get the job and have no ambition. He may be tired of flying and does not want to put in too much effort. He is enjoying job stability without having any ambitions or new objectives. Therefore, his productivity does not meet expectations." [14]

According to some participants, this lack of ambition can be traced back to how individuals were raised. The idea here is that individuals who have not learned to strive for more but rather have been taught to be happy with where they are, are automatically less inclined to change their attitudes and behavior.

"It is sometimes hard to change such employees as they have grown up in a comfortable community and do not want to change even with training.... They don't have a high desire to be committed and work. They feel satisfied with the little." [13]

A different explanation was provided by another participant who said that the level of motivation is also dependent on the career stage of the employee. Specifically, their view was that older employees nearing retirement might not feel motivated to increase their productivity because they are happy with where they are.

"Productivity can vary according to the desire, which is subject to the career stage. For some people, if you provide them with some incentives and resources, their productivity will increase. For others, in certain career stages, such as the near-retirement stage, they want to stay in the same place and do not want to increase their productivity and prefer to stay at the same level." [16]

3.1.2 Personal Gain

A different type of motivation stems from ethical responsibility, which refers to the expectation that employees are intrinsically driven to contribute to their company, thus maximizing their productivity out of ethical responsibility. Interestingly, one participant mentioned that this type of motivation is a national and religious duty.

"I believe that this is a very important aspect and a national and religious duty. Our Prophet says: "God loves that if one of you does a deed (or a job), he masters it." We are all Muslims and believers and from a patriotic perspective, we are all sons of this country, wherever you are. ... In your place, your job and your work in the company, in the government sector or anywhere, you have to provide the highest productivity... This is a patriotic duty, and you are not excused if you spared an effort to achieving that." [2]

Yet, our results suggest that some participants lack a sense of ethical responsibility and are therefore less likely to maximize their personal productivity.

“Unfortunately, there are good employees, but they differ from the previous example in that they only do what is required of them during the period of time given to them and do not strive for better. They may reach the result within the assigned period, or return to you with the problem and not the solution, and wait for the solution from you, unlike the one who has high productivity, who wants to finish the task in order to take the next task.” [4]

3.2 Managerial Factors

The managerial factors that impact employee productivity encompass elements that the managerial team of a company can directly control. These factors relate to the manager’s attitude towards and familiarity with their employees, responsible behavior, clear communication of goals and company strategies, time spent on personal evaluations of employees, and attention for employee recognition. Each of these factors is discussed below.

3.2.1 Manager’s Attitude and Familiarity

How management operates and associates or dissociates itself from employees impacts an employee’s productivity (Bajaba, Bajaba, & Basahal, 2021). In this regard, our findings suggest that employees who work under managers who positively interact with their employees are more productive than those who work under managers who negatively interact with and clearly segregate themselves from their employees.

The rationale behind these findings is that the former type of manager is generally well-liked and appreciated by employees, whereas the latter type of manager is more likely to be associated with negative feelings. Well-liked managers are often regarded as caring individuals, and as a result of feeling cared for, employees who work under such managers are likely to reciprocate their appreciation by working hard and thus being highly productive.

“As a leader, I carry out tasks with them. This, in addition to joking, laughter, spending some free time, and the spirit of brotherhood motivates them.” [3]

As noted above, well-liked managers are usually individuals who positively interact with their employees and aim to create a fun working environment. In practice, this translates into a familial work environment that stimulates employees’ productivity, according to the participant.

“All the employees I work with are familiar to me, I know their names and the names of their family members. These details affect the employee and make him feel that he is working with a family more than an employee.” [6]

Part of creating such an environment is introducing non-work-related activities that allow employees and managers to get to know one another and make the workplace less formal.

“It is crucial to provide care for the human element. I think it is ok to allocate a large room for taking breaks and it can be a nice idea to introduce some entertainment games during working hours. Such recreational activities can be performed while they are at work and result in them feeling attached and loyal to their employer.” [14]

Although these findings suggest the value of friendly, fun, and supportive work environments is important, they have to be nuanced as some participants warned that being too informal and friendly with employees can result in employees feeling unaccountable, thus creating unproductive behavior. As such, a good balance between fun and work is paramount. According to participants, such a balance can be achieved by drawing a clear line between what is and isn’t allowed and monitoring employees’ productivity.

“Some employees, instinctively, do not work unless they feel being watched. Sometimes you have to take action with them, and then you will notice a significant increase in performance.” [6]

3.2.2 Responsible Behavior

Our findings highlighted that a manager whom their employees perceive as a responsible and professional figure is likely to be trusted and respected. Consequently, employees who work under such a manager are said to be often highly productive out of respect and appreciation for their superiors. Specifically, a responsible and professional manager translates into a manager who supports and protects their employees and is physically present and approachable at work.

In terms of the former, participating managers emphasized the value of employee support and taking responsibility for mistakes. According to them, such managers are viewed as caring individuals. It was anticipated that when working under this type of management, employees are intrinsically motivated to be highly productive.

“I took on an earlier project that was failing, and the previous manager put the blame on the staff. But, when I came, I made the employees understand the importance of the project and that this drop is expected during the life of companies ... I told them that I will take the blame in case of failure, and they only have to do their best. ... I said that failure is mine and success is yours. At the end of the project, certificates were distributed and they gained trust, and the project turned from failure to success.” [3]

A responsible and professional manager also translates into a superior who is physically present and approachable at work. In this regard, our findings suggest that when a manager is physically present at work, employees feel automatically inclined to show their best efforts. This is because employees tend to imitate their manager’s behavior and, as such, follow their example. Thus, employees are likely to do the same if a manager shows up on time and shows true engagement with his work.

“The manager has to be the ideal role model for work. For example, my boss did not ask me to come early to work, but I imitated him and came early.” [7]

3.2.3 Clear Communication

To avoid decreased employee productivity, participants noted that managers should regularly and clearly communicate with their employees. Our data suggest that regular communication is important because managers are expected to ensure that the company goals and strategies are clearly communicated to employees. Regarding the former, providing direction and communicating expectations are indeed important conditions for ensuring employee productivity, and without such guidance, employees may not be able to fulfill their tasks appropriately.

“When people in management provide instructions and directions, productivity of the team tends to be high. But, when the planning is improper and undirected, productivity tends to decline.” [13]

Besides providing clear guidance, effectively communicating the company strategies is important so that employees know how their workplace functions and what they can expect from their company. A participant explained:

“The key reason is the lack of long-term strategies or the absence of crystal-clear strategies. If you aim to reach stability on the long-run, it is advisable to set a clear strategy. ... Having a clear role and a uniform system makes the employee motivated. This is because there is an obvious strategy, and the employee knows how to be promoted and where this work goes.” [12]

3.2.4 Personal Evaluations

Our results suggest the importance of managers regularly engaging in personal conversations with employees to maintain a positive relationship between managers and employees and identify and resolve problems, confusions, and uncertainties. To avoid discouraging employees, participants explained that it is important to always highlight the positive aspects before mentioning the areas in which the employee lacks.

“The meeting commences with a discussion with the employee in which we first focus on positive aspects and his strengths. ... Following, we address the deficiencies of the employee, where his production is not as expected. We discuss the mechanism of enhancing his productivity rate in the areas of weaknesses he is experiencing.” [9]

Although participants said these conversations are important to have with every single employee, they seem to be especially necessary for employees with low productivity. In this case, it is advisable that the manager engages in a personal conversation with the specific employee to find out why their productivity is low and what can be done to increase it.

“Sometimes, there may be a kind of disagreement between the employee and the management system, so you must listen and clarify these problems, and you must approach these problems.” [2]

However, for such conversations to be fruitful, the employee must feel comfortable with the manager. If not, employees may be less inclined to open up to their manager, and the problem may remain unresolved, which in turn may lead to continued low productivity. According to some participants, to ensure that employees would feel comfortable going to their managers when encountering issues, it is important to create an inclusive environment in which employees feel cared for, as was elucidated previously.

“Once a sense of inclusion is maintained, a kind of mutual harmony and trust exists. This is what we always look for and focus on. Through inclusion, there will be more frankness and integrity in determining the obstacles encountering the employee. Without such frankness, it would not be easy to

identify these obstacles.” [8]

During these conversations, it is important that the focus lies on what the employee needs to resolve the issue and increase their productivity. This is crucial because a focus on the employee's needs is believed to increase their motivation, which would in turn result in an increase in employee productivity. However, if after such a conversation the productivity of the specific employee remains low and the manager feels that the employee's needs were appropriately addressed, a warning must be given. Although warnings are often interpreted as negative feedback, one participant explained that if well-communicated and placed in the right context, a warning can be motivational rather than discouraging.

“Personally, I keep a warning in a frame in my office. I received it in the company in my previous place of work. I always show this warning to the employee I want to give a warning and tell them that the warning is there to motivate and encourage them. When I got it, I didn't consider this warning as a punishment, but instead, I took it positively and correctly. So, they should be a source of strength.” [6]

3.2.5 Employee Recognition

Employee recognition is considered one of the most impactful factors contributing to employee productivity. The rationale behind this strategy is that being recognized for efforts can instill internal feelings of pride and self-worth, increasing employee's motivation and work ethic. On the other hand, a lack of appraisal and recognition can lead an employee to care less about the company and care less about his productivity.

“Some managers don't say thank you; they don't motivate employees. This does not increase productivity. ... This destroys work because the manager takes actions that affect the productivity of the employees. Every single word affects the work, and so does the manager; who does not appreciate the employee.” [7]

Interestingly, the results suggest that employees gain motivation from being personally recognized and from seeing others being recognized. In this regard, managers explained that they often purposefully acknowledge an employee's good work in front of other employees with the aim of stimulating others to demonstrate the same productive behavior.

“Thank the employee over and over so that he can continue, and this must be made clear to the rest of the employees so that they can be encouraged and follow the distinguished employees.” [2]

3.3 Organizational Factors

Organizational factors are those factors that make working for a company either attractive or unattractive. Our findings are that the most important perceived organizational factors relate to tangible benefits such as monetary incentives and promotions, the provision of work flexibility, the ability and opportunity for employees to further develop their professional skills, and the physical appeal of the working environment. These factors are further elucidated in the below sections.

3.3.1 Tangible Benefits

Tangible benefits play an important role in employee productivity because they are believed to function as motivating factors. Promotions and monetary incentives in the form of bonuses and commissions were systematically mentioned by all participants and seemed to play a particularly important role in increasing productivity.

“Financial matters are well known, and their impact has been previously addressed. Such things make a person work as much as he can.” [12]

Some participating managers said to specifically display which employees have received bonuses through emails in the hope that this would motivate others to work harder and enjoy the same benefits.

“This information can be employed to motivate the rest of the employees, such as giving examples of the best employees who received incentives during the previous quarter of the year. ... Providing such examples and figures to the other employees and the volume and speed of profit help motivate them to work hard and get quick profits by promoting their productivity.” [1]

The effectiveness of this strategy, though, must be nuanced as another participant believed that openly announcing who has received bonuses or promotions can create jealousy and discourage employees who have not received such:

“Some weakly productive people compare themselves to others. A person sees someone else getting a promotion while he does not get it despite his belief that he should get a promotion, so his productivity

will weaken as a result of his dissatisfaction.” [15]

Although the above findings suggest a clear role for tangible incentives in increasing employee productivity, these findings should be nuanced because they were believed to only stimulate employee productivity as long as the employee would find these incentives attractive.

3.3.2 Work Flexibility

Work flexibility was regarded as an attractive company benefit that could positively impact an employee's productivity. Specifically, this concept can be interpreted and implemented in various ways. First of all, flexibility can refer to individualized start and end times without reducing the total number of weekly working hours. In other words, flexibility in this context can be understood as offering employees an alternative to the traditional nine-to-five working hours. According to participating managers, some employees appreciate the idea choosing when they start their workday because it allows them to plan and schedule their work around their own needs and preferences. As such, their productivity increases.

“Giving the employee a sense of flexibility in terms of beginning his work time is important. For instance, work starts at 8 a.m. and ends at 3 p.m. Allowing the employee to be late for two hours, so he can start his work at 10 a.m. and ends at 5 p.m. is what we do here.” [8]

A different and possibly more popular interpretation of work flexibility is the disbandment of eight-hour working days and the introduction of workweeks that depend on completing tasks. The idea here is that an employee who works fast and can finish up their daily workload in less than eight hours would be allowed to leave work earlier.

Participants noted that requiring employees to be physically present at work for eight hours regardless of how quickly they can finish their work can be an unnecessary demand and even “a punishment”. In this context, there is no incentive for employees to work fast, and as such, it is unlikely that their productivity will increase. Contrariwise, if employees are allowed to end their workday as soon as they have completed their daily tasks, they may feel more motivated to work faster and more productive.

“When the manager keeps the employee from 8 to 5, he is, in fact, holding the employee accountable for time and not for output, and this is a mistake. ... Technically, our workday ends at 5, but I may expect an employee to leave earlier because they have finished their work and most of the work is allocated for that specific day. Some managers do not see it as a benefit, but I see it as a merit for modern generations, who want to feel comfortable at work and want to feel like the place of work is not a prison.” [7]

Finally, a third way to interpret work flexibility relates to how easy or difficult it is for employees to schedule their holidays. Our results suggest that at some companies filing for vacation is a long and complicated process, or employees are not allowed to take leave when they want. According to some participants, this lack of flexibility can decrease an employee's productivity as it may make them feel undervalued and insufficiently cared for. On the other hand, employees who work for companies that do offer satisfying flexibility are believed to be more productive out of gratitude.

“You should be flexible in the matter of vacations and do not try to make things complicated. You can ask the employee about his desire to distribute the leaves and days off; some want them to be divided over the year and there are those who want to take them at once.” [4]

3.3.3 Professional Development Opportunities

According to participating managers, many employees appreciate opportunities to further develop their professional resumes, and as such, offering productive employees' opportunities to develop their skills can motivate employees to increase their productivity.

“If one of the employees shows outstanding performance, I shall assign him some big tasks, such as making him responsible for managing a department or giving him more powers. This shall give him more self-confidence in the first place, and he will exert greater efforts to prove that he deserves it.” [9]

This idea of offering employees' opportunities to develop their skills also works advantageous for managers, because according to participants, skills and knowledge are inherently associated with productivity.

“When certain skills are lacking or when the employee does not know about certain skills, his productivity may be impaired.” [15]

Offering professional development opportunities can also translate into offering task flexibility. In this regard, the findings implicate that routine work can indeed become tedious and decrease employee productivity because

employees are no longer motivated to produce. To avoid such, managers said that they would regularly change employees' positions to keep the job interesting, give employees opportunities to develop other skills, and ultimately maintain their motivation and promote high productivity.

"In routine work, I imagine that boredom at work is the most prominent factor. So, we, every year and a half in the company, we start changing positions in the company according to the person's skills, so that he does not repeat his work continuously, so that he cannot get bored, lose his spirit and lose productivity." [6]

3.3.4 Physical Environment

A final organizational characteristic that seems to impact employee productivity relates to the physical environment. In this regard, our results suggest that when employees work in an attractive and enjoyable environment, they are thought of as producing well. This is because working in an environment where employees' physical needs are attended to makes them feel appreciated and leads to higher productivity.

"When one of the managers decides to serve coffee to employees only once per shift ... I see this decision as very stupid because the cost of coffee and tea is simple, and it causes an increase in the productivity of the employee when he feels comfortable." [5]

In addition, participating managers also noted that providing the necessary materials and work environment for employees is also paramount as without such, employees would not be able to perform their tasks, thus being less productive than required.

"Another thing is the working conditions, such as air conditioning, non-disturbance, and calmness; an essential part of employee productivity depends on material things. ... one of the most important pillars of productivity is the absence of a source of inconvenience, the provision of the air conditioner, and the tools that the employee needs, such as the device he works on, and ensuring that these tools are fully provided to the employee." [17]

4. Discussion

This qualitative study aimed to explore the employee, managerial, and organizational factors the employee, managerial and organizational factors that influence employee productivity from a Saudi manager's perspective. Data for this study were collected utilizing 17 semi-structured individual in-depth interviews with Saudi managers from different sectors. Transcribed interviews were then analyzed thematically and resulted in the development of three key themes and several subthemes.

Essentially, the employee factors are related to the employee's motivation and sense of responsibility. Employee productivity was indeed evaluated as being largely dependent on how intrinsically motivated an employee is to contribute to their company. In this regard, we found that such motivation is guided by two factors: self-interest or personal gain and feelings of ethical responsibility towards the company. In relation to these findings, previous studies (e.g., Bawa, 2017; Darachart, 2019) have found that employees who are satisfied at their place of work are more likely to be productive out of ethical responsibility.

Lack of motivation was considered highly problematic because regardless of how a company is structured and what benefits are offered to an employee, the general perception was that an employee's productivity would remain low without the proper motivation. Main factors that can explain this lack of intrinsic motivation related to a natural disinterest in personal growth, the career stage of an employee, and the absence of a sense of responsibility. These findings are new and we suggest further in-depth exploration of how these factors impact employee productivity.

The managerial factors encompassed aspects that can be controlled by managers themselves. These factors relate to the manager's attitude towards and familiarity with their employees, responsible behavior, clear communication of goals and company strategies, time spent on personal evaluations of employees, and attention for employee recognition. In terms of the manager's attitude towards and familiarity with employees, our results implicate that how a manager operates and associates or dissociates him/herself from employees impacts an employee's productivity. Specifically, we found that employees who work under managers who are personally familiar with and positively interact with their employees are more productive than those who work under managers who negatively interact with and clearly segregate themselves from their employees. This is because the former type of manager is perceived as a caring individual, and employees tend to reciprocate their appreciation for such managers by working hard and maximizing their productivity. This type of manager is also perceived as being more likely to be dedicated to making the work environment fun and attractive, although maintaining a productive balance between fun and work was said to be paramount.

Working under a responsible and professional manager, which translated into a manager who supports and protects their employees and is physically present and approachable at work, was said to increase employees' intrinsic motivation and productivity. Further, supporting previous findings from Iqbal (2010), Mahamid et al. (2013), and Mahamid (2013), our results suggest the importance of clear and regular communication with employees about the company goals and strategies. Indeed, without the proper guidance and awareness, employees are perceived as being unlikely to produce efficiently.

Personal communication and regular evaluations with employees – especially those with low productivity rates – were also deemed important to maintain a positive relationship between managers and employees and identify and resolve problems, confusions, and uncertainties. In this regard, Kum et al. (2014) found that lack of personal feedback to employees decreases productivity, as the absence of these personal evaluations makes employees feel undervalued and less accountable. Adding to these findings, our results suggest that in order for employees to be open up about potential negative experiences and problems, it is important that they feel comfortable with the managers, further supporting the idea of creating an inclusive environment and positive relationship between manager and employee.

A last managerial factor is related to employee recognition. In this regard, our findings suggested that being recognized for efforts can instill internal feelings of pride and self-worth, increasing and employee's motivation and work ethic. On the other hand, a lack of appraisal and recognition can lead an employee to care less about the company and care less about his productivity. The literature on the role of employee recognition in company productivity has been documented (e.g., Banya, 2017; Bawa, 2017); however, our findings add new insights as it seems that recognizing employees' efforts in front of others not only stimulates the employee who is receiving the appraisal, but also others who want to experience the same acknowledgment.

Organizational factors are those factors that make working for a company either attractive or unattractive. Our findings are that the most important perceived organizational factors relate to tangible benefits, the provision of work flexibility, the ability and opportunity for employees to further develop their professional skills, and the physical appeal of the working environment. Tangible benefits such as promotions and monetary incentives in the form of bonuses and commissions were found to play a relevant role in employee productivity because they are believed to function as motivating factors. These findings support the results obtained by Bawa (2017). However, our findings add new insights as we found that the impact of these types of incentives was said to depend on how attractive employees deem them. As such, it was implied that tangible benefits might be of less interest to employees who are not looking for promotions or are not driven by money.

Our findings suggest a particularly important role for work flexibility which we find can be interpreted in various ways. Work flexibility can indeed be interpreted as offering employees an alternative to the traditional nine-to-five workday, without reducing the total number of weekly working hours; the disbanding of eight-hour working days and introduction of workweeks that depend on task completion; and easing restrictions and processes with regards to time-off. Our results suggest that especially the second interpretation is important and should be considered by organizations, confirming earlier results obtained by Karim (2020) and Pencavel (2016).

With reference to professional development opportunities, we confirm findings from Tahir et al. (2014) that opportunities for skill development are appreciated by employees and often lead to increased productivity. Because, according to our data, skills, and knowledge are inherently associated with productivity, and we know that in the Saudi context, there is a high rate of unskilled local workers (Peck, 2017), we advise companies to invest in providing employees with such opportunities. To conclude, our findings implicate that when employees work in an attractive and enjoyable environment, they are likely to produce well. We find that employees who feel their physical needs are attended to make them feel appreciated by their superiors and lead to higher productivity.

4.1 Contributions and Implications

This study adds to the body of literature on employee productivity. The implications of this study are that the results may help organizations better understand how, from a manager's perspective, employee productivity can be increased. Based on our results we find that managers play a particularly important role in employee productivity. Specifically, we found that employee productivity is impacted by the manager's attitude towards and familiarity with their employees, responsible behavior, clear communication of goals and company strategies, time spent on personal evaluations of employees, and attention for employee recognition. Considering the relevance of these aspects we recommend companies to organize more training sessions for managers that are built around the abovementioned topics.

It is also hoped that the results may incite organizational change in ways that will benefit both employees and

organizations. Our findings indeed reveal that tangible benefits, the provision of work flexibility, the ability and opportunity for employees to further develop their professional skills, and the physical appeal of the working environment are important organizational factors that can determine how productive an employee will be. As such, we advocate for organizations to review their structure and culture and consider including the previously mentioned factors in their work practices.

4.2 Limitations and Future Research

Although the results of this study add to the body of literature on employee productivity and more specifically provide valuable qualitative insights in terms of the employee, managerial, and organizational factors that influence employee productivity from a Saudi manager's perspective, there are some limitations that are worth mentioning. Qualitative studies are naturally bound by various limitations due to – amongst other things – their highly subjective and interpretative nature, lack of statistical reliability, and relatively small sample sizes.

First and foremost, it is important to recognize that qualitative studies are prone to interpretation or bias. Specifically, the results of this study may have been implicated by three types of biases: participant bias, researcher bias, and selection bias. Participant bias, also referred to as social desirability bias, occurs when participants respond to the questions based on what they think is the right answer or what is socially acceptable rather than what they really feel (Jann et al., 2019). In the context of this study, it is anticipated that participant bias did not have a major impact because of the limited sensitivity of the study topic. Indeed, this problem occurs mostly when the topic is highly personal and sensitive, which was not the case in this study. Yet, its potential presence has to be taken into account as data validity partially relies on the honesty and frankness of the participants, and social desirability bias may have negatively impacted trustworthiness of data.

A second type of bias is researcher bias. Research bias occurs when a researcher unknowingly interprets data to meet their hypothesis, or only analyses data that he or she thinks is relevant (Johnson et al., 2020). To limit this type of bias, the researcher consulted an independent qualitative researcher to justify his analysis and interpretations of the data. However, qualitative research remains subjective in nature and researcher bias therefore has to be taken into account as a limitation of this study. In addition, unlike quantitative studies that entail the use of hard and unambiguous data, qualitative findings are prone to interpretation. It should therefore also be taken into account that if another researcher had carried out the current study, different qualitative themes may have emerged, resulting in a different presentation of the results. We recommend for future researchers to re-analyze the results of this study and collect additional data.

A third type of bias was selection bias, which relates to both the process of recruiting participants and study inclusion criteria. In qualitative research it is common to recruit participants with a range of experiences in relation to the topic being explored; therefore, accounting for biases in relation to the sampling strategies is essential (Smith & Noble, 2014). This study sought to explore and identify the employee, managerial, and organizational factors that influence employee productivity from a Saudi manager's perspective. To this effect, this study was automatically biased towards Saudi managers. Individuals who are not in management functions were not included in the study and their views were not represented. As the views of these populations may have positively contributed to the topic, it is possible that the researcher missed out on certain information that could have resulted in a better and more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. With this in mind, one recommendation is for future researchers to replicate the study and invite other populations to speak about the topic. The perceptions of other populations may indeed contribute to a better understanding and evaluation of the employee, managerial, and organizational factors that influence employee productivity.

Another limitation of this study is its relatively small sample size. This study investigated the views and experiences of 17 Saudi managers from different sectors. A sample size of 17 is considerably small and it is possible that other results may have been obtained if a different sample of individuals was interviewed. In line with this limitation, it is important to keep in mind that the findings do not directly extend to wider populations with the same degree of certainty that large-scale quantitative studies would have (Sutton & Austin, 2015). We therefore recommend future researchers to replicate the study and use a larger sample size, as well as deploy multiple data collection methods – such as the combination of qualitative with quantitative methods. The advantage of using mixed-methods is that the results can provide statistical reliability while at the same time offering an in-depth understanding of the results.

Lastly, it is important to note that this study intended to offer an overall view of the employee, managerial, and organizational factors that influence employee productivity in Saudi Arabia. Although this paper offers a proper overview of the most important factors that impact employee productivity, we recommend future researchers to zoom in deeper on a particular set of factors; for example, the managerial factors, to get a deeper understanding

of what managers can exactly do to increase their employees' productivity.

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